



News Release

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Study Shows Emergency Departments Could Play Larger Role In Detecting, Reporting Domestic Abuse

(Salt Lake City, UT) – A new Utah Department of Health (UDOH) study shows emergency department (E.D.) professionals need more training and resources to help them uncover and report domestic violence against women.

The 2003 Emergency Department Survey on Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence, found only half of E.D. professionals along the Wasatch Front believe they are sufficiently trained to identify injuries that result from abuse, or to interview women they believe have been assaulted. In rural Utah, only 40 percent of providers say they are adequately trained.

The study also shows only half of E.D.s openly encourage their personnel to ask patients if they have been abused, and only half of those surveyed say they routinely question patients about the issue.

Rather than a cause for alarm, study coordinators say the results show health care providers are in a unique position to help stop abuse. "Emergency departments are often the first line of defense for battered women," said Ned Searle, Utah Domestic Violence Coordinator, Lt. Governor's Office. "These results point to a prime opportunity for E.D. directors to train their staff to recognize intimate partner violence. If providers know what to look for, they'll be better able to ask the right questions and identify victims."

Once abuse is uncovered, victims need to know where to go for help. But the questionnaire found that 50 percent of E.D. professionals think there aren't enough resources for women who have suffered abuse. Half of all rural hospital E.D. professionals surveyed say they don't have printed materials to give to victims.

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“These are all areas where small steps can make a big difference,” said Amy Gibbons, lead study coordinator, UDOH Violence and Injury Prevention Program. “We need to make sure staff members at all Utah emergency departments are adequately trained, that they are encouraged to routinely ask patients about abuse, and that they have domestic abuse brochures and hotline numbers on hand.”

Another barrier revealed by the survey is that victims are reluctant to ask for help. Ninety-five percent of doctors and nurses surveyed said that, when they do ask patients about abuse, suspected victims often deny it or don’t want to talk about it. However, several studies indicate that, when done properly, E.D. screening for intimate partner abuse is effective in identifying victims, and that patients aren’t offended when health care providers ask about domestic violence.

Other facts about domestic violence include:

- Half of all adult female homicide victims in 2002 were killed by an intimate partner.
- As many as one in four Utah families suffers from some level of domestic violence.
- One in 14 Utah children has either heard or seen physical abuse in the home.

The survey was given to all 41 emergency departments in Utah. Of the 150 professionals who responded, 75 percent were doctors and nurses on the front lines of treatment.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness month. The UDOH encourages victims to help themselves by reporting abuse to end the cycle of violence. For more information or for copies of the report, contact Cyndi Bemis at (801) 562-9488 or (801) 550-4228.

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